

ARTICLE APPEARED
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NEW YORK TIMES
15 SEPTEMBER 1980

ESSAY

No Ado About Plenty

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 — On Dec. 18, 1979, White House motor pool logs will show, the President's brother summoned a White House limousine to take him and aide Randy Coleman to the Libyan Embassy. The check for arranging meetings that led to "assurances" of a pro-Arab Carter policy was not yet ready; a few days later, Coleman returned to pick up \$20,000. (Neither man has yet been asked about that Dec. 18 visit.)

In an equally obscene combination of the sale of influence and the abuse of Federal perks, Billy Carter again demanded and got a White House limo on March 4 of this year to drop off Ron Sprague, the accountant under drug investigation, to press the Libyans on Billy's behalf for more money.

Common taxicabs are not prestigious enough for First Brother on his private business: the White House cars, chauffeured by members of the armed forces, demonstrated to Libyan officials that the President's brother was a man of influence.

Billy's illegal peddling of that influence, made possible by a brother who knew about his lawbreaking and would not stop it, is a scandal of Teapot Dome proportions. However, the new standard of political ethics is now "Is it as bad as Watergate?" Unless impeachable offenses are proved, the already-demonstrated abuse of trust, misprision of felony and outright lying are dismissed as "much ado about nothing."

Some interesting nothings:

1. *The tennis court meeting.* On June 11 of this year, when Joel Lisker of Justice told Billy Carter that the Government knew of secret Libyan payments, the President's brother then admitted to a \$200,000 "loan" and announced he was going to the White House to complain about harassment.

The Qaddafi agent then hurried for protection to Dr. Brzezinski, who called in Presidential counsel Lloyd Cutler, who in turn arranged for lawyers sensitive to White House public relations needs. But in testimony last week, a hitherto concealed fact popped out: that same day, Billy also had a "brief" meeting on the tennis court with Jimmy Carter. (Strange how the President's most delicate meetings are at first forgotten, then described as "brief.")

On the tennis court that June 11, Billy was in the biggest panic of his life. I wonder: did he not complain to his brother, as he warned Lisker he would, of harassment? Did he not mention to his brother the meetings just held with Brzezinski and Cutler, or the fact that his Libyan payments were known?

2. *Brzezinski's selective memory.* The normally meticulous National Security Adviser insists he kept no record of the historic White House meeting on Nov. 27 with Billy and the Libyan official. But now it develops that three days later, Zbig had a telephone conversation with Billy Carter — and maintains he has "no recollection of the call." Was nobody listening — or was anybody told not to listen?

One curious conflict in Brzezinski's public statement concerns the sequence following his receipt of the top secret intelligence report about Billy Carter's impending oil deal. Brzezinski attests this took place "in March," followed by his call to Billy Carter "on the afternoon of the day I received the report," followed by his briefing of the President "the next day."

But dope this out with me: The White House says the President was briefed by Brzezinski about the intelligence report, as well as Zbig's call to Billy, on April 1 (Wisconsin primary day). That would mean that Zbig received the information from C.I.A.'s Admiral Turner on March 31 (which Turner will confirm) and called Billy that same afternoon.

Billy Carter has testified, however, that he thinks he returned the call from the Best Western Motel in Americus on April 1, not March 31 — and has supplied a wealth of corroboration, including a vivid recollection of his return that morning from an April 1 meeting with Charter Oil in Jacksonville.

Here's the significance: If Brzezinski's telephone conversation with Billy took place after, rather than before, Zbig briefed the President — then we have been misled. Then Justice's investigation of the Zbig leak would have to include the President.

Perhaps Zbig will change his story from "the next day" or perhaps the telephone toll records of the motel in Americus will clear this up, but right now the published dates do not jibe. And somehow, the notion of any White House staffer directing the President's brother to pass up a huge oil deal without first talking to the President stretches credulity.

3. *The gaps in the President's diary.* Jimmy Carter has made public 16 diary entries covering an 18-month period on the subject of Billy and Libya. Curiously, there were no entries for April 1, when startling news about his brother's oil fortunes became known to the President, or on June 11, when his brother dropped by at the tennis court after his devastating experience at Justice. Not important enough to note perhaps?

This week, as Appointments Secretary Philip Wise exhibits his own forgettery (Appointments Secretary Dwight Chapin went to jail for saying "I don't recall"), Chairman Birch Bayh will press to cut off the inquiry. If he succeeds, the exposure of the Billygate scandal will be postponed until after the election — leaving it to special prosecution in the spring.